DMH PLANS TO CLOSE TAUNTON HOSPITAL THIS YEAR CALLED “DANGEROUS”

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, JAN. 24, 2012…..Taunton Hospital, a 169-bed state mental health facility, will be shuttered by the end of the year and its patients transferred to facilities in Worcester and Tewksbury, the Patrick administration announced Tuesday, describing the decision as an effort to cut costs in the mental health system and maintain the state’s 626 beds.

“The plan to close Taunton State Hospital and transition patients, families and staff to the [Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital] continues a necessary shift away from an institutional culture within antiquated facilities to one that uses anticipated savings to enhance community placements for consumers,” Barbara Leadholm, state commissioner of mental health, said in a letter to DMH staff. She added, “This plan not only achieves our fiscal goal of minimizing revenue loss to the state General Fund, it also mitigates the possibility of further reductions to other DMH services.”

The decision drew immediate outrage from the Massachusetts Nurses Association, which called the impending closure of Taunton Hospital “cold hearted and dangerous.”

“We have no mental health care safety net in Massachusetts. There are not, and have not been, enough beds or services in the system for years. This decision will only exacerbate a long standing crisis,” said Karen Coughlin, a nurse at Taunton State Hospital and vice president of the MNA. “People will continue to go without care, crime will increase, homelessness will increase, more people will end up in the corrections system and many more will commit suicide. This closure along with other cuts to programs and services represents the state's continued abandonment of the mentally ill in our society.”

The nurses’ association rejected the suggestion that the move to the Worcester facility – which is newly built and scheduled to open later this year – would preserve the number of beds already available for mental health patients. Rather, they argued the Worcester hospital was built to replace Westborough State Hospital, which was closed in 2010.

In a phone interview, Coughlin said DMH could have looked at ways of “spreading the wealth” around the state to prevent the closure of Taunton Hospital while still living within its budget.

“We understand budget constraints,” she said. “On the other hand, we recognize that there’s a crisis going on in the system right now. There actually aren’t enough beds to address the needs of the patients that are out there.”

Rep. Shaunna O’Connell (R-Taunton) said the announced closure of the hospital isn’t a surprise to Bristol County lawmakers but that it would still present challenges for her city because many residents work at the facility and many patients are from the area.

“As we move forward we want to make sure that that people can keep their jobs … I also spoke to Commissioner Leadholm about Taunton having additional resources because they will be releasing some of the patients to community group homes,” she said. “We want to make sure that we are able to handle that caseload.”

Asked whether there was no chance to stave off the hospital's closure, O’Connell said, “That seems to be the case. This has been on the chopping block for quite some time. It may be time that we have to face reality that it is going to close at the end of the year.” In her letter, Leadholm argued that the state would “continue to serve adults, children, adolescents and families in our services with the utmost responsiveness, dignity and respect.”

“Preparing to move into a new hospital and closing an existing one is a significant undertaking and I acknowledge the challenges ahead. We must also acknowledge the remarkable accomplishment that this initiative represents,” she said, adding, “We look forward to working with union leadership and staff, consumers, family members and caregivers, state and municipal elected officials, and the mental health community throughout this time of transition.”